

INDIAN ACORN GAME

SUMMARY: Students will hear a story about the Atsugewi Indian use of acorns, learn how to make an acorn top, and play an Atsugewi children's game.

GOAL: For students to learn about the importance of acorns in the lives of the Atsugewi Indian people

OBJECTIVES: Students will be able to (1) name three uses of acorns by the Atsugewi, (2) describe how and when acorns were gathered, and (3) make an acorn top and play a game with it.

GRADE LEVEL: Third through Fifth

TIME REQUIRED: Two 45 to 60 minute periods

LOCATION: Classroom

MATERIALS: Acorns, small sticks about the size of a matchstick, and sharp stones to drill holes in the acorns

SUBJECTS: CA History/Social Science, Language Arts, Science

KEY WORDS: Atsugewi (Aht-zsu-GAY-wee), Acorn, Food Source

BACKGROUND: The Atsugewi Indian tribe (also called the Hat Creek Indians) lived on lands northeast of Lassen Volcanic National Park. Their summer territory included the Manzanita Lake area and much of the northern part of the park. Today, many of the Atsugewi live near the small community of Hat Creek. Acorns were an important food source. They were gathered in the fall when the leaves were changing colors. The Atsugewi people preferred acorns from California Black Oak (*Quercus kelloggii*). The Black Oak is a common species found in lower elevation mountain areas. The acorns from Black Oaks can be stored up to seven years after being dried. Acorns were carefully examined for small holes caused by insects. Good quality acorns have no holes. The Acorn Game was played by the Atsugewi children when there was free time. This game, acorn identification, and top-making skills were taught to the children by the women in their families. Acorns were used for food, jewelry, and as medicine for an upset stomach.

The information in the Acorn Story is taken from the Anthropological Records, 14:2, Atsugewi Ethnography, by Thomas R. Garth, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1953. An excellent source of information about the Atsugewi is the book Indians of Lassen by Paul E. Schulz, Lassen Loomis Museum Association, Lassen Volcanic National Park.

INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE: Discuss the importance of acorns in the lives of the California Indians. Discuss what life as an Atsugewi Indian might have been like before the pioneers came to California. Read and discuss the Acorn Story. Explain that the students are going to make acorn tops. Atsugewi children made acorn tops as toys and used them when playing the Acorn Game.

Acorns will need to be gathered; it is best if students can do this. The best tops are made with short, round, well-balanced acorns. If you are unable to find a source for Black Oak acorns, most other types of oaks found in the Sacramento Valley and surrounding foothills will do, especially Live Oaks. Students will also need a stick the size of a large kitchen matchstick (you may wish to provide matchsticks with heads broken off) and a small pointed rock for drilling a hole in the acorn.

When you are back in class, spread the acorns on a large flat surface so the students can choose their acorns. Explain that they are now going to make their acorn tops. Show them a completed top and demonstrate how to make one. Make sure the students have all the items they need. It is recommended that they make their tops on the floor of the classroom or outside. They begin by drilling a small hole (one fourth to one-half inch deep) in the top of the acorn for the stick to fit in. The top of the acorn is the rounded end opposite the pointed bottom. The hole should be the same size as the stick so the stick fits tightly into the hole. The small stick is then carefully wedged into the top of the acorn. The pointed end is the spinner part of the top that spins on the ground and the stick extends into the air providing balance.

You may wish to make some extra tops in case some of the student tops break or do not work. When the students have finished their tops, they are ready to play the Acorn Game. Atsugewi children used the thumb and forefinger of one hand to spin their tops. Have the children practice spinning their tops in preparation for the game.

To play the Acorn Game divide the class into small groups of four or five students. Spread the groups out around the classroom floor or outside on the sidewalk or other hard surface. Everyone in the group must start spinning his/her top at the same time. The top that spins the longest is the winner in each group.

EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT: (1) Dry acorns and make acorn flour. Leach the flour and make acorn mush and/or acorn bread. (2) Have an acorn shelling contest. (3) Have the students teach younger students how to make acorn tops.

ASSESSMENT: Have the students answer questions based on the Acorn Story. Student acorn tops can also be used as a product in the assessment process. Have the students make another acorn top at home with a parent, relative, or friend. Have them bring the newly made tops to school.

ACORN STORY

The Atsugewi used many different kinds of foods (meat from game animals and many kinds of plants) because no one source provided enough food to ensure that the people would not go hungry. The Atsugewi cleverly learned about many kinds of food and used a great variety.

Acorns were one of their most important vegetable foods. Men or agile girls climbed oak trees and knocked acorns down with sticks or they stood below and knocked them down with longer sticks. Women gathered the fallen acorns in baskets. Black acorns were preferred over white. If acorns were picked slightly green, they were not as good. Acorns were carried in baskets about as big around as a basketball and as tall as two basketballs piled on top of each other. The baskets were so heavy that they had to be moved in stages to the Atsugewi winter quarters.

Many of the acorns were dried in the shell on slabs of bark and stored in pits or granaries. Shelled acorns were stored in large baskets in the cookhouse or outside covered over with bark. Acorn shelling was a social occasion. Young people had contests to see who could shell ten acorns the fastest. They shelled the acorns with their teeth or by pounding the up-ended acorn with a rock, using another rock as an anvil. One person might do the cracking and another might take the shells off; both boys and girls participated. The split acorns were dried on platforms of branches and pine needles, supported on four posts about three feet high. On rainy days a fire was built underneath to dry the acorns.

Acorns were prepared for eating by being smashed in a basket. The flour was sifted by shaking it on a board or flat basketry tray; the larger pieces were separated out and pounded over again. These one and one-half foot square sifting boards were once made from sections of hollow trees ground to the required thickness with stones. The flour was leached in a basin in the sand (later on in a basket topped with flour sacking); cold water was poured through the meal two or three times and then warm water was poured through until it tasted right. The prepared meal could be stored until needed.

To make acorn mush, acorn flour and water were put into a basket with hot stones that had first been dipped in water to remove the ashes. Two forked sticks were used to lift the hot stones. A plain stick served as a mush stirrer. Mush was ordinarily eaten with meat. Each person had his/her own small basket of meat and mush and ate it by making a spoon with the index and middle fingers. To make acorn bread, some of the meal was mixed with water and a small quantity of earth. It was then molded into small biscuits or larger loaves and wrapped in sunflower leaves. The bread was cooked all night in an earth oven. It might keep a week without spoiling and was often taken by men on hunting expeditions.